

Sunu Rose Joseph

Lecturer of English

Bharata Mata College

Thrikkakara, Kochi, India

sunurosejoseph@gmail.com

Flavours Wafting from the *Mirror City*: A Culinary Reading

Abstract: In today's globalized world the geographical borders in food culture have largely vanished but we can still find evident traces of traditional food culture in each social group. In a cosmopolitan culture, culinary practices and nativities overlap in many instances of life, and literature as well. Food as a part of cultural identity is projected in literary works since time immemorial. This article intends to discuss the 2014 novel *Mirror City*, culinary writer Chitrita Banerji's debut work of fiction, which gives explicit indications of food in its narrative to convey the core of its story; the life of a young woman who moves from Calcutta to Dhaka with her marriage in the 1970s. Aromas and flavours that take Uma back to her homeland memories are drawn in parallel to her many moments of joy; while the conflicting tastes of Dhaka are metaphorically used to portray the misfit that Uma has turned out to be in her new country. Each of the food-centred instances in the novel is pivotal in building the storyline, which also makes it a remarkable work of fiction driven by culinary moments.

Keywords: culinary, food fiction, culture, Bengali cuisine

The act of living in the olden days can be solely attributed to the quest for food. The bygone days when humans gathered food by hunting, and later when they settled on fertile lands with the aim of growing agrarian crops and rearing animals for food, might seem to be

stories far from reality for the twenty first century humans who have the food of their choice reaching him at the swipe of a finger. Food is no longer just a nutritional substance to maintain life and growth as dictionaries define, but a key attribute that relates to the life and culture of individuals, that bind them to the community or society they are part of. And we are now living in a time and place where this relation and its coexistence is being subjected to heated debates and even causing social unrest. Food in the early days were largely made out of what they could get from the surroundings, and later out of what they could grow or rear – and largely dependent on geographic and climatic features. As the human race expanded to occupy larger pieces of earth's land mass, the variety in cuisine also became distinct and definitive attribute to the identity of places, communities and its people. Room for individual choices gradually expanded with the growth of agriculture and industrialization. And today with globalization, the geographical borders in food culture have largely given way to individual choices but we can still find evident reminiscences of traditional food culture in each social group.

Food as a part of cultural identity is projected in literary works since time immemorial. In literary works we can read or derive so many aspects of the life of its characters from the references to food. Right from the era of mythological works, and through the medieval ages, we can see that implicit culinary references and explicit indications of food practices are used by authors to throw light into the time and social circumstances of the plots and characters being portrayed. It can be observed that the Upanishads give a lot of emphasis to food practices and suggest that at the practical level food is the ultimate truth while soul and spirituality are all matters of intellectual debate, states Devdutt Patnaik. Foods referred to as the favourites of Gods in the puranas are part of the religious life of followers, as it can be seen that such food articles are in practice of being offered to those Gods as part of rituals and festivals at various places of worship.

There is a lot of interest invested in food in the contemporary literature considering the changing socio-cultural atmosphere. For example Jennifer Burcham Whitt has studied three postcolonial Indian novels, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, that are identified to have food as a driver of the plot and a key feature of the characters, as well as a reflection of the aspects of culture of the social setting of the story. With more and more people migrating across geographic boundaries in pursuit of better education or career, food has become an active agent into which homeland memories are stuffed. In the fast paced globalized world food memories are a seasoning agent for the flavours of an exile's cultural identity. In narratives and essays food is placed as an icon of the intractable measure of cultural and ethnic identity.

It is not surprising that writer Chitrita Banerji in her first attempt of fiction has condensed striking references to food to percolate an aroma of Bengali cuisine throughout the reading. She is an author, journalist and translator who is known, perhaps more for her culinary books. Famed as food historian, she feeds her readers with a blend of food, nostalgia and culture. The acclaimed writer is most captivated by the twin topics, Bengal and Bengali food. Throughout the length of her debut fiction, she ponders over the authenticity of dishes that have become trans-cultural. Being one of the best food writers in India, she is fascinated by the relation of food and its impact on religion and culture. In a 2008 Interview to TimeOut Dubai she is quoted saying "I'm sure that a sense of nostalgia and sense of loss fuelled my writing. I know that when I'm writing, in my mind I'm always trying to recapture something."

Chitrita Banerji actively involves culinary symbols to present Bengali culture and she is by no means the only literary figure to establish a connection between the culinary realms and ethnic memories. Anita Mannur describes food as a central part of cultural imaginations

and she has mapped how it figures in various expressive forms across literary works by South Asian authors including Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*, Bharati Kirchner's *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries*, Shobha Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes*, Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* and *The Mango Season*.

This article intends to discuss the 2014 novel *Mirror City*, Chitrita Banerji's debut fiction, which gives explicit indications of food in its narrative to convey the core of its story; the life of a young woman who moves from Calcutta to Dhaka amidst the political upheavals in Bangladesh of the 1970s. The turbulence in the newly created nation has its impact on every character in the story, creating instability in one or the other aspect of life. *Mirror City* unfolds the luminous young lady Uma who moves on through the travails beset in the course of her life and ultimately severs all commitments.

Uma Basu, a Bengali Hindu woman, the protagonist in the novel finds herself in the charged atmosphere due to her unorthodox marriage with Iqbal, a Bangladeshi Muslim man. Uma, infatuated by the notions of freedom that embraced her youth submits herself to the fantasies of the modern world. Estranged from her family and friends she desperately seeks chances to come to terms with her life in the new country. Moreover to aggravate her miseries, with each passing day, the bond of love between Uma and Iqbal enfeebls. Iqbal, her only consort in the new land, withdraws into a world of his own abandoning her. She miserably fails to carve out a space either in Iqbal's heart or in his country and finally quits from her marriage.

The novelist gives a detailed description of the food flavours of Uma's homeland Calcutta and Iqbal's native Bangladesh. Uma senses the incompatibility of the flavours of the two regions symbolizing the uneasiness she feels in her married life. The inner conflicts of her mind are brought to limelight through the way her taste buds averts the Bangladeshi food. The food centred memories in the novel breathe life to the ethnic traditions in Uma's

homeland. Food in *Mirror City* permeates the cultural heritage of two cities – Calcutta and Dhaka; which Uma happen to live during her two phases of life, separated by just a few miles, that speaks the same language; yet belonging to two different countries having entirely diverse social environments.

The fervent enthusiasm with which Uma chased the illusions of a mirror city is finally rendered as a disillusion. *Mirror City* is just a figment of her imagination, a chimera. Dhaka, in East Bengal is treated as a mirror city of Calcutta in West Bengal. But unfortunately, it deviates from the magical destination in her mind. The weird surprises in the mirror city leave Uma sapped and enervated. She feels like a bird flitting in and out of its cage encircled by the aftermaths of an uneasy marriage: agony of losing her family, question of religion and her new found lover. Moving to a new city and her emotional cut off from Iqbal heightens her insecurity. Unable to figure out her purpose within the family and country she dreads every moment in the mirror city. In a desperate attempt to pull herself together she obviously falls back to the memories of her Bengali home every now and then. The thoughts on food, seasons, rituals and customs in Bengal soothe the rough terrains in her mind. A whiff of Bengali food is the best tranquilizer to calm down the unbridled chain of irremediable questions that torments her. Whenever at the wit's end, the aura of Bengal paints a serene vision in her mind.

The story begins with Uma, during her studies in the United States, finding love in a classmate who steps into her life with a flavour of the season. It was a time when she was reminiscing the four day celebration of the goddess Durga that was happening back home. In a state of utter loneliness, she got an unexpected call her Muslim classmate whom she had met just a few weeks before. The spirit, colour and joy of Diwali celebrations are expressed through the medium of food in Bengali families, wherein family and friends customarily come together to relish on festive dishes and exchange extravagantly decorated sweets.

Sweets are an innate part of Bengali lifestyle for they celebrate all delightful moments with variants of “mithais”. Iqbal walked into her life in the autumn of 1968 with an exquisite chocolate mousse cake with the two words Shubho Bijoya written on it in white icing.(8) It was the moment of beginning of a new voyage for her, first act of joyful sharing, savouring each mouthful. The sweet act from Iqbal to a traditionally sweet-craving Bengali woman marks the onset of Uma’s life ahead in the story.

The mundane act of eating has several implicates in the novel. Food acts a strong metaphor in the story that lets out pungent nostalgia from the emotionally starved Uma. Bengali food is valorised in Mirror City through the culinary practises in Uma’s homeland. Bengali calendar marks six prominent seasons: Grisma (summer), Barsa(rain), Sarat (autumn), Hemanta (late autumn), Shhith (winter) and Basanta (spring). Each season is a celebration of life. The onset of monsoon and the great love Bengalis have for Hilsa fish is described in mouth watering ways in the novel.

On the first weekend of the monsoon, her father always went to the market himself, instead of sending the cook, to buy the season’s delight – a couple of large hilsa fish, plump with roe. And it was Uma’s mother who took charge in the kitchen, making several of her hilsa specialities. Even after all these years, Uma couldn’t recall anything more delectable than the taste of the crisply fried pieces of fish and roe, served with steaming helpings of golden kichuri made with rice and roasted yellow moong beans. (53)

Rituparna Roy states that it is time for Bengalis to celebrate when rain clouds gather over the shores of Padma. It is a custom for Bengalis to roll up sleeves and gear up for the monsoon season’s harvest, the iconic Hilsa fish. It reins the fish markets of West Bengal being titled ‘Queen of Fishes’. The fish is popular food amongst the people of South Asia and in the Middle East, but especially with Bengalis and Odias. In West Bengal the monsoons are

fondly called ‘Month of Hilsa’ and a popular dish cooked by Bengalis is ‘kichudi’. The dish is common in Bengali households and is a special way of cooking rice and lentils together with some added herbs. Pranad Ray has mentioned that Jimutavahana, the 12th-century poet, in his work *Kalaviveka* has indicated that the Hilsa fish and the oil in which the fish is fried were popular in Bengal. Hilsa is an inevitable part of Bengali life; every significant occasion is adorned with delicacies involving Hilsa. Rituparna Roy has also found that Hilsa has even got its place in rituals, as for example it was a wedding custom for a groom’s family to present hilsa wrapped in a red saree and jewellery to the bride’s family. Hilsa is the taste of their home for Bengalis living around the world.

Unravelling the new city of Dhaka more she is baffled by the totally new combinations of food that she could have never paired if in Bengal. She is bewildered by the strange combination of kichuri and beef bhuna. (55) Melissa Pearce has found that the Bangladeshi cooking is influenced by the Mughlai cuisine which is an offshoot of Persian and Arabic cuisine. They use more of beef, one of the popular dishes being beef kabab which is rarely consumed in West Bengal due to religious reasons. Uma, taking it for a food taboo suggests defiantly that it has to be kichuri and hilsa.

The panache with which Bengalis celebrate Holi is evoked in Uma during the instance when Fayeze, Iqbal’s friend, invites her for his wedding reception on the day of the festival. Uma had lost track of the festivities back home but Shaukat’s reminder awakens her memories of Holi during her days in Calcutta, and along with it comes the memories of speciality sweets for the festive time. When she set off for the wedding reception under a clear sky illuminated by the radiance of the full moon of Holi she least expected to feast on a rich meat platter totally ignorant to her Bengali palate. Her misery of having met and married a man who had never plunged in the colours of Holi is aggravated by the unlikely menu that welcomed her at the reception. (132)

The sumptuous feast served at the wedding of Fayez leaves her tossing and turning in the bed that night. The rich meats and rice pilaffs cooked in clarified butter disagree with Uma's dietary practices. (134) In destitution and lack of food autonomy, orders are disrupted, identity is disturbed, and feelings of insecurity and disorientation may easily develop into serious illness and dislocation. The shape, colour, smell and taste of food are widely used as a factor to map the domain of people. Food as well as the unique choices of combination is a token of social identity. (Niehaus and Walravens, 980) Dhaka separated by a few miles from Calcutta projects an identity completely strange in the eyes of Uma. "Each time she was struck by the difference in feel between this city and the one where she had grown up, separated though they were by a mere couple of hundred miles" (26). The cuisine in East Bengal evokes a different appeal to her body and senses bringing out the food combinations that are antithesis in the two cities.

While Uma pretends to have adapted to the Bangladeshi cuisine her mind tells a different story, evident from her thoughts at the dinner party at Fayez's home. Though Lily, Fayez's wife, was a superb cook the dishes she prepared failed to relate to the pattern of Bengali food so impressively entangled in her senses. The raw materials that had gone into the making of each dish had been the same as in her country but after being cooked everything acquired a queer taste which she cannot appreciate. Unable to assimilate the Bangladeshi flavour, often at times she feels the necessity of a translator to take her food with meaning (151). The chicken had been coated with spiced poppy-seed which was unimaginable for Uma. The poppy-seed paste is a condiment and additive usually mixed with rice by Bengalis especially in the afternoon. Poppy seeds are popular for inducing sleep and hence a perfect lunch intake for Bengalis who appreciate a siesta. Food has a strong link to the emotional memories of Uma who has idealized the Bengali cuisine. The flavour of her

homeland is stored at some unreachable corner of her brain and every time at the sight of food she tries to retrieve the taste and smell of the long lost moments.

It can be seen from the story that Uma makes frantic attempts to exude the warm vivifying aroma of her Bengali home at her kitchen in Dhaka. On a chilly winter morning when she sees Sobhan, her servant, preparing savoury toasts intense memories are evoked in Uma. She lets out the winter mornings in Bengal when her mother used to prepare delicious toasts for the family. A strong intersection of food and memory plays at this moment. Immediately she takes charge of the kitchen and makes toasts according to the recipe of her mother. With eagerness she relishes each mouthful of the toast specially prepared by spreading ghee and seasoned with freshly ground pepper and salt (212). This in fact is one of her sweetest, long-forgotten food memory. Throughout Uma's life in the alien country, food has a myriad emotional meanings associated with it.

In another occasion Uma was much enchanted by the particular blend of tea served by Alim Choudhary at his apartment. A respite from her lacklustre life was the extramarital love that gradually bloomed with Alim Choudhary, a renowned businessman in the country. She was captivated by the aroma of a very superior Darjeeling (237). The Darjeeling tea indigenous to the region is famously known for its magical taste in the international market and this unique flavour has fetched it a GI status as well. Like the bewitching grey blue eyes of Alim the key flavour notes in the cuppa served by him too cast a spell on her. He was so bent on giving her the perfect brew by adding a spoonful of honey. In the world of tea the colour and depth is of prime importance. The aroma, flavour and goodness of the straw coloured liquid brought back a handful of memories of her father. She remembers the days when she accompanied her father to buy tea from a special shop. Her father was a tea taster with immense awareness of the vocabulary of the flavours of tea. A pleasant blend of flavours and memories are unlocked by the magnificent tea served by Alim. The rejuvenation

imparted by Alim's tea in Uma can be attributed to the psychological effect it had on her nerves by letting out the aroma of her bygone days.

Later in the story, when Alim and Uma spent a day at the village of Bilapur, the simple and uncomplicated lunch served is one that will linger in the minds of readers. In the customary way they sat under a shaal tree on brightly coloured, hand-woven cotton rugs. It consisted of a simple serving of rice, vegetables and dal. They ate out of plates made of Shaal leaves (301). In an indistinct manner, Banerji has communicated an age old Bengali practice of sitting on floor and eating rice using hands through the rendezvous of the lovers. Shaal leaves are a recurring feature in many of Chitrita Banerji's works. In her work, *The Hour of the Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal*, she has explained in mouth watering ways how the devotees' palates are vitalized by the soft melting kanchagolla served on shaal leaves. "Once they have gone through the ritual of offering, the devotees are free to eat and enjoy these soft yet grainy rounded shapes served on disposable plates of shaal leaves, their milky flavour curiously enhanced by the slightly smoky odour of the leaf container."

Even though *Mirror City* stands out as a novel, Chitrita Banerji's culinary inclination is evident throughout the work. Food is used as a key driving factor at many critical junctures in the story. Many important incidents in Uma's life are plotted with food as a metaphor of her individuality – the Bengali Brahmin girl belonging to Calcutta. The storyline is fed with the contradicting flavours of Calcutta and Dhaka to depict Uma's life in Dhaka as stale and insipid. Each of the food-centred instances in the novel is concerned with her memory of Bengal.

Mirror City, though a work of fiction, has got its author display her inclinations as a culinary writer throughout its storyline, by using flavours and aromas as agents that evoke the protagonist's memories and realizations. Tastes that take Uma back to her home are drawn in

parallel to her many moments of joy, and those conflicting tastes of Dhaka are metaphorically used to portray the misfit that Uma has turned out to be in her husband's city and in his life as well. Uma's thoughts and conversations in the story referring to her native cuisine and lifestyle around food during her early days in Calcutta, not only gives her nostalgic memories but also distances her from the ways of life in Dhaka. Lupton has found that childhood memories of food were linked strongly to family relationships and the rituals of shared mealtimes and the emotions associated with them. These memories could be more powerful in food choice than rational criteria. Uma's character as defined by the author is an evident example of an individual who shapes her thoughts and emotions with the backing of the memories of her childhood flavours. Duruz suggested, food memories from the early days of life supplied communities with cultural resources with which they could construct 'imaginary places of stability and security' to sustain their identities. (250) Such a stability and completion was what lacked in Uma's Dhaka life chapter and this realization gradually pushed her into a pursuit of a life elsewhere, in which she could sustain her self-identity and find stability and safety.

The novel *Mirror City*, that tells the tale of Uma and her life in two near though far cities can be put among works of fiction that display clear usage of culinary practices in navigating through the storyline, could be a food for thought for researchers in areas relating fiction and cuisines. The comparisons of Dhaka and Calcutta, Uma's life in the two cities and her relationship with Iqbal are all narrated by the author with the flavouring of cuisines and culinary traditions of the two cities.

Works Cited

- Banerji, Chitrita. *Mirror City*. Penguin Books, 2015.
- Banerji, Chitrita. *The Hour of the Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal*. Penguin Random House India, 2006.
- Duruz, Jean. "Food as nostalgia: Eating the fifties and sixties." *Australian Historical Studies*, 29(113), 1999, pp. 231–250.
- Lupton, Deborah. "Food, memory and meaning: The symbolic and social nature of food events." *Sociological Review*, 42(4), 1994, pp. 664–685.
- Mannur, Anita. *Culinary Fictions*. Temple University Press. 2010.
- Niehaus, Andreas and Walravens, Tine. *Feeding Japan: The Cultural and Political Issues of Dependency and Risk*. Springer. 2017.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. Food is Truth: What the Hindu Gods are given to eat and why. *Scroll*, 19 July. 2016, www.scroll.in/article/811994/food-is-truth-what-the-hindu-gods-are-given-to-eat-and-why. Accessed 10 September 2018.
- Pearce, Melissa. Defining Bengali Cuisine: The Culinary Differences of West Bengal and Bangladesh. *Culturetrip*, 13 November. 2015, <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/bangladesh/articles/defining-bengali-cuisine-the-culinary-differences-of-west-bengal-and-bangladesh/>. Accessed 12 September 2018.
- Ray, Pranad. 1987. *Banglar Khabar*. Calcutta: Sahityaloke
- Roy, Rituparna. For the Love of Hilsa. *Roads & Kingdoms*, 27 September. 2017, <https://roadsandkingdoms.com/2017/for-the-love-of-hilsa>. Accessed 12 September 2018.
- Whitt, Jennifer Burcham. "An Appetite for Metaphor: Food Imagery and Cultural Identity in Indian Fiction." University of East Carolina. 2011.

Interview - Chitrita Banerji. *TimeOut Dubai*, 05 May. 2008, www.timeoutdubai.com/restaurants/features/2541-chitrita-banerji. Accessed 15 September 2018.